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SUBJECT: SARAN LAUDS SECRETARY'S "LANDMARK" VISIT

1. (U) In the GOI's first public comments on Secretary Rice's just-concluded visit to New Delhi, Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran called it "landmark" and evidence of the US-India strategic partnership. Speaking at a small CSIS-sponsored gathering of senior foreign policy experts on March 17, Saran observed that the term "strategic partnership" has been used so often with so many different countries that it has almost lost its meaning, but that in the case of US-India relations, the description indeed "has such a character," and "very substantive implications."

Democracy as "Cement," Bilateral Interests Will Mesh

2. (U) Saran's based his assessment on two points:

-- the United States and India are two great, vibrant democracies, with diverse, pluralistic populations, which serve as "cement" for the relationship. Ties have become so extensive that they touch almost every aspect of life. Conceding that there remains considerable cynicism in India about democracy as a slogan, the Foreign Secretary argued that "when President Bush speaks about his commitment to democracy, he means it." Democracy was a major reason for his (the President's) support of the US-India relationship, Saran stated.

-- India sees the United States as playing an important role in "what India wants to become." With India looking for "larger strategic space for itself," and "greater strategic autonomy," Saran said his current assumption was that these yearnings would not only "not clash with India's interests," but that they would also "mesh well with US objectives," and cited US-India cooperation during the Tsunami disaster as an example.

Energy, Defense Cooperation

3. (U) The Foreign Secretary went on to highlight the energy dialogue and defense cooperation initiative as important outcomes from the visit. The GOI and the United States need to work together on energy issues, he stated, because of India's "mind-boggling energy needs." Stressing that India cannot rely on fossil fuels, and will have to turn more to nuclear energy, he expressed clear satisfaction that greater civil nuclear cooperation is "now on the table." India was no longer facing a "theological NO," he said, stressing that "we need to talk about all issues" and predicting that energy would become a major component of US-India relations in the future.

4. (U) On defense cooperation, Saran spoke positively about moving beyond existing mil-mil ties, for example to defense research conducted by the two countries' private sectors, and to potential major acquisitions. Citing Secretary Rice's comments that the US wishes to be seen as a reliable partner, the Foreign Secretary made the obligatory reference to "reliability of supply," reiterating that the most important concern for India was predictability. Noting that India is one of the few states with the resources for and interest in purchasing 125 combat aircraft, he said reliability was something that "exercises the Indian mind." "If we could reconcile these differences, the two countries would enter an important new era," he stated.

5. (U) Saran concluded his remarks that he was very optimistic about the prospects for US-India relations, and that India was looking forward to the President's visit.
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